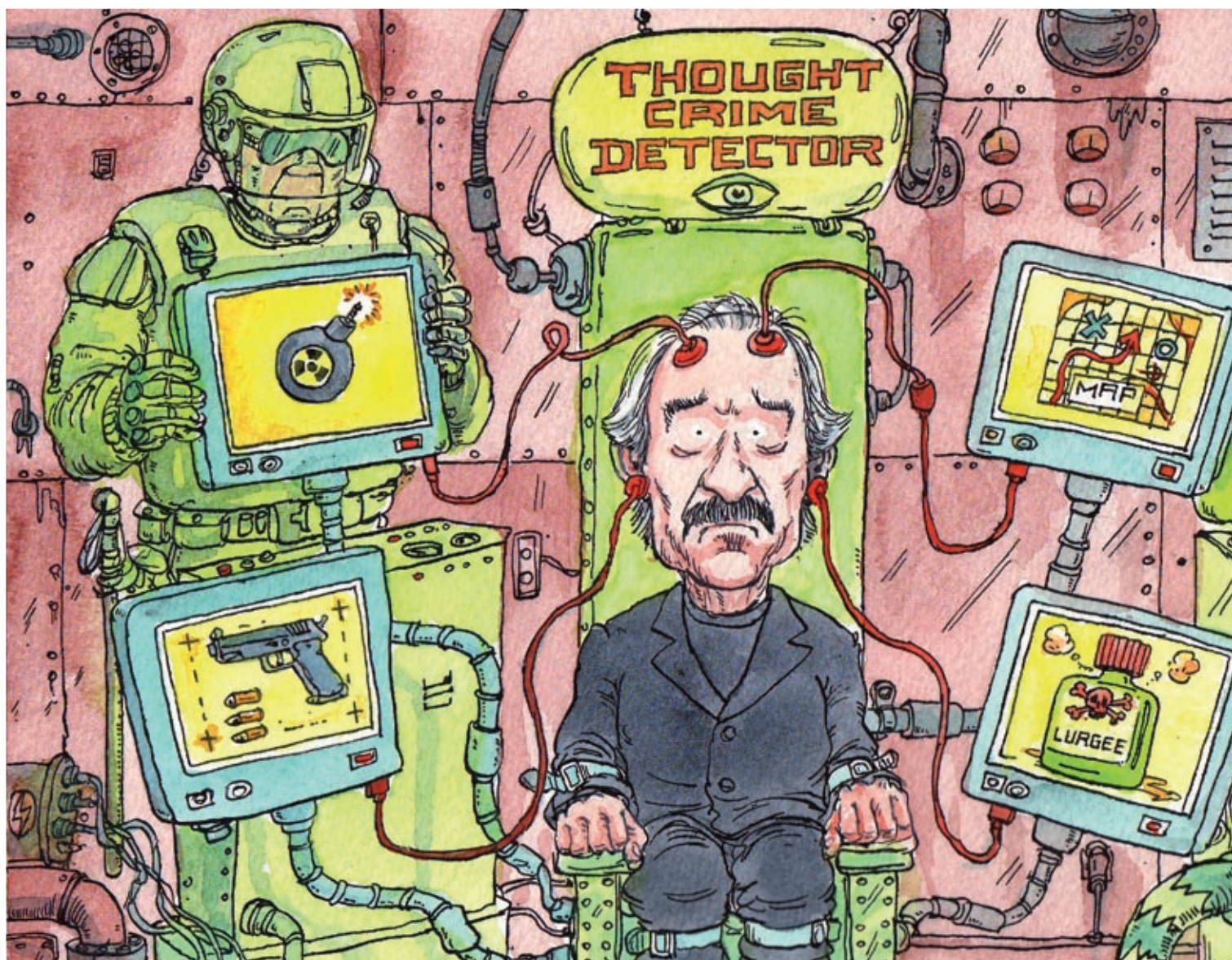




RANTS & RAVES

Can you be arrested for what you're thinking? Mel Croucher hopes not. He also hopes no-one digs around on his hard disk, as he's not sure that they won't find anything incriminating

THINK NO EVIL



**MEL CROUCHER
RANTS**

Consider this. On Monday, a medical student went to an ancient university library to browse the dusty bookshelves for information. It seems the information concerned respiratory diseases. On Tuesday, the student was arrested under suspicion of planning terrorist acts, because the books contained references to biological warfare.

On Wednesday, it was found that the library shelves also hold

books on revolutionary theory, religious fundamentalism and how to assemble an atomic bomb. On Thursday, the press got hold of the story and established that the library has a specialist department of detailed maps with the exact locations of terrorist targets, including public water supplies, transport hubs and the homes of political leaders. On Friday, there were demands to ban public access to such dangerous information. On Saturday, a mob surrounded the library and burned it to the ground.

This sequence of events has happened many times. It happened

in 48BC, when the most advanced human knowledge was destroyed during the burning of the Library of Alexandria. It happened in the 1930s, when the Nazis burned all libraries of books that deviated from their twisted philosophies. And when Francis Bacon wrote "knowledge is power" in his 1597 *Meditations of Heresies*, he could easily have been discussing today's universal access to information via the internet.

BURNING ISSUE

Now I invite you to consider this. Are recent calls to burn down those

parts of the internet that store information that could be used for harmful purposes as barbaric and stupid as those historic calls to burn down libraries? Conversely, if we need to close down bits of the web that are too dangerous for public access, do we also need to close down libraries for the same reason? I hope not. I am disturbed by the premise of rounding up and jailing people for what they may be thinking, because I do not believe there is any scientific or practical method that can prove what thoughts exist in the human brain. And that includes thoughts about murder and terrorism.

If the security forces ever decide to arrest me, I have no doubt they could examine my computer and find "evidence" that I am thinking about committing crimes. I am sure I have files that deal with revolutionary theory, religious fundamentalism and how to assemble an atomic bomb. I also admit to accessing detailed locations of terrorist targets,



including public water supplies, transport hubs and the homes of political leaders. The fact that I use Wikipedia and Google Earth to locate this information as opposed to a man in a balaclava is irrelevant. I wonder what the authorities would find if they impounded my hard disks and backup files. I really do wonder, as I have no idea what's on there.

NO HIDING PLACE

Before I continue, I further invite you to consider the contents of the thousands of your own files in your own possession, whether known to you or not, and then I'll let you into a secret. From 2000 to 2007, I was chairman of an internet watchdog and ethics organisation. My duties included considered judgement on cases involving internet domain name hijacks. The material dealt with racism, incitement to violence, homophobia and child pornography. I have no idea what still remains on my backup discs from that time. And I believe you

have no idea what is under your roof, either. Perhaps you once forgot to set the Adult Content filter. Maybe you unwittingly passed on a bogus email with embedded links to criminal websites. Or was there some unsolicited pop-up that spawned hidden files in your system? As I say, I am an expert in these matters, and if I cannot prove a negative then I'm damn sure the press and the spooks can't.

This leaves us with an interesting dilemma: how do we prove that files on a computer are evidence of a person behaving illegally? Can we assume that the accused was thinking about using commonly available material to commit a terrorist act? I don't believe that we can and I don't believe in Thought Crime, full stop.

I do believe that people who do wicked things should be apprehended, legally tried and jailed if found guilty by a jury of their peers, but if we incarcerate people for thoughts we suppose they might have, we are returning to the days of witch-burning. In my opinion, the greater social crime is committed by the facilitators of illegal material on websites: the website designers, the HTML programmers, the domain name agencies and, above all, the banks that process subscription fees by online credit card transactions. I believe they are all guilty of conspiracy to entrap and incite.

RULE OF THE MOB

The wider problem is that of lynch mobs incensed by 'facts'. Once a person has been arrested for having incriminating files on their computer, how long will it take for the population to raise arms and set out with a mob to take bloody revenge? It is acts such as this that undermine the criminal process, chipping away at the point of having a legal system.

It's a dangerous game to take the law into your own hands, as it starts out with a reasonable excuse to bring down a criminal, but can so rapidly turn into attacking people for what they think, believe or even look like.

Before you know it, the problem can escalate, and it's never safe to assume that you won't be next on the list. Are you so sure of the innocence of your files that you can afford to accuse others on few facts? I'll bet that if you check your PC now you'll find some information that could be used against you, even if it's an innocuous Google Earth search or a recently accessed Wikipedia entry. And if not you, what of your children's files? Check their

computers, consoles and mobile phones, and you're bound to find data that could easily look incriminating.

TRASH THE CASH



MEL CROUCHER
RAVES

I never liked money very much. Don't get me wrong: I have nothing against solvency, or even affluence. It's the filthy lucre itself I don't like. Those little discs of poisonous metal that make my trousers bulge like a baboon's bum, and those bits of printed paper, riddled with cocaine, killer bugs and crap artwork. But maybe we don't have to put up with cash any more. Now, after one thousand years of waiting, financial technology finally allows us to go all-electronic, and I for one have decided to ditch money altogether. This month, I would like to invite you to consider the benefits of going cash-free.

Cash has had a good run. In ancient China, the first coins were actually shaped like Polo mints, and merchants would string them together on silken cords. But the more successful they got, the heavier their burdens of wealth became. Don't you empathise with the ancient Chinese, as you tote your toxic coins and pestilent banknotes around, at risk from loss by accident, oversight and daylight robbery?

To solve this problem, the ancient Chinese left their cash in the care of a trustworthy person, and in return they received a small square of durable material recording how much wealth they could redeem. And so the credit card was born, in what the Tang dynasty called 'flying money'. Only a thousand years later, Diners Club came up with the same idea, followed by American Express, Visa and all the rest.

CREDIT CRUNCH

Now, in my ongoing quest for a simpler and stress-free life, I have stopped using credit cards as well as cash, and I only use my debit card, which has my mugshot emblazoned all over it for security reasons, plus a touch of vanity. Not for me the monthly usury and flagellation that is the madness of living beyond one's means on credit.

My personal banking has been online for years, and I also submit accounts and tax returns via the web. It's a doddle. These days, even venerable institutions such as Dennis Publishing pay me my menstrual wage by electronic bank transfer. Similarly, I pay my

merry band of helpers their pittance in the same way. It takes seconds, I have total control and I can monitor everything 24/7.

Virtual cash has been with us for over five years now. Over 10 million Oyster cards have already been issued for the purchase of everyday services such as cinema tickets and packets of Nicorette. But this is as nothing compared to MasterCard's PayPass system, soon to be emulated by Barclaycard's own version.

These marvellous devices work by osmosis, and it is the technology behind them that has finally persuaded me to trash the cash. Here's how it works. First, you invite your PayPass identity to absorb some of your personal wealth from the comfort of a secure website or, for the more adventurous of us, from a piss-stained ATM slot in a howling gale. Once your PayPass has become a virtual representation of your liquid assets, you can buy stuff simply by waving it in the general direction of the checkout, turnstile or kiosk.

Like a shape-shifting superhero, PayPass can assume a variety of guises. It can look just like my debit card, or it can be held in a handy key fob; it can even take up residence in a mobile phone. Better still, I will soon be the proud possessor of the next-generation card, which works outside the UK and pays for my indulgences in the local wonga. No more currency exchange commission misery for me!

BRASS TAX

I also think electronic wealth is good for the soul. The Exchequer hates cash as much as I do, because they can't track it, which means they can't tax it. If we all wear our wealth on our electronic sleeve, we can be taxed justly and promptly for the social benefit of everyone, except tax-dodgers. And misers will no longer be able to rot their souls counting and recounting hoards of coin and bullion. In fact, getting rid of cash will also help me with my own spontaneous acts of small kindness, because I will no longer be doling out coinage to beggars, buskers, charity collectors and children. Instead, I shall brighten their lives by handing them carefully chosen personal gifts, such as a signed copy of my latest book or a can of Special Brew, purchased electronically, not on the web, but on the street.

The tyranny of cash is over. The freedom of virtual money has arrived, and I am off to take advantage of it – just as soon as someone lends me the taxi fare home. **CE**